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Abstract

On January 26 1988, the Aboriginal actor and ecologist Burnam Burnam landed at Dover and laid claim to England, solemnly undertaking to rule justly and never to souvenir, pickle or preserve English heads.¹ His colourful and dramatic contribution to the Australian bicentennial celebrations reminds us of an aspect of Empire that we in Britain would probably rather forget. It is not widely known that in the nineteenth century there was a good market in London for dried human heads from the South Pacific. Attempts by humanitarians to suppress the trade were resisted: a prominent Mayfair buyer named Thomas Pringle regularly wrote letters to *The Times* pointing out that attempts at suppression ran counter to traditional British policies on Free Trade. This aspect of Empire is generally edited out of British perceptions. As Ann Dummett has observed: 'The real truth about the history of the Empire is not palatable to English people' - because it is not what they have been taught, and because it conflicts with the basic standards of good behaviour and British decency that they have also learnt in growing up. 'They know that England abolished the slave trade; they do not know that England first grew rich enough to capitalize the world's first industrial revolution on the profits of slavery that had accrued over two centuries.'²

RUTH BROWN

The Songlines and the Empire that Never Happened

On January 26 1988, the Aboriginal actor and ecologist Burnam Burnam landed at Dover and laid claim to England, solemnly undertaking to rule justly and never to souvenir, pickle or preserve English heads.¹ His colourful and dramatic contribution to the Australian bicentennial celebrations reminds us of an aspect of Empire that we in Britain would probably rather forget. It is not widely known that in the nineteenth century there was a good market in London for dried human heads from the South Pacific. Attempts by humanitarians to suppress the trade were resisted: a prominent Mayfair buyer named Thomas Pringle regularly wrote letters to *The Times* pointing out that attempts at suppression ran counter to traditional British policies on Free Trade. This aspect of Empire is generally edited out of British perceptions. As Ann Dummett has observed: 'The real truth about the history of the Empire is not palatable to English people' – because it is not what they have been taught, and because it conflicts with the basic standards of good behaviour and British decency that they have also learnt in growing up. 'They know that England abolished the slave trade; they do not know that England first grew rich enough to capitalize the world's first industrial revolution on the profits of slavery that had accrued over two centuries.'²

These opposing perceptions of the British enterprise – decency and good behaviour on the one hand, and a brutal quest for wealth on the other – are noted also in *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow's aunt thinks that in his work for a British Company in Africa, her nephew will be an emissary of light or a sort of apostle 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways'. Marlow on the other hand thinks that 'there had been a lot of such rot let loose in print about that time' and that his excellent aunt was living amidst humbug. He 'ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit'.³

How does Britain cope with this opposition in a post-Imperial age? One way is to take up sides, militantly. Broadly speaking, conservatives who continue to uphold that the Empire meant the dissemination of British culture, tradition, and law and order are ranged against left-wingers who see it as an exercise in brutal exploitation. These are the extremes, and probably most people take up a position somewhere in between the two,

aware that the Empire created problems as well as conferring benefits, but never really facing up to the horror of 'robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind'.⁴

We are encouraged in this amnesia by a literary culture which over the years has successfully sanitized the Empire, making of it a colourful heyday and a source of nostalgia. The Indian Raj is particularly susceptible to this approach. Another way of figuring the Empire is to ignore its material practices altogether, implying that all it ever involved was the extension of culture. We can see this latter process at work in a very popular recent representation of Australia, *The Songlines* by Bruce Chatwin.⁵

I want to give a reading which suggests that the major players in the Imperial drama are subjected to subtle re-alignment so that Britain, as cultural centre is absolved of all blame for any inhumane behaviour. In general terms the categories are that Aborigines are spiritual, Europeans are cultured, and white Australians are either racists who despise Aborigines, or philistines who deny access to their sacred knowledge. It is as if at some point on the journey from Britain to Australia a transformation occurred so that acts of atrocity or indiscretions of taste inconceivable for decent Britons are likely to be perpetrated by uncultured Australians.

As the *Daily Mail* reviewer puts it: 'A white nomad himself, Chatwin's affinity with the footloose tribes of the endless outback yields one of the most affectionate portraits yet of a race ravaged by the alcohol that so many other Australians privately hope will become a self-administered final solution.'⁶

The narrator in *The Songlines*, Bruce, presumably Chatwin himself, is in Australia to investigate the songlines, the songs by which the Aborigines are said to have sung their world into existence and mapped it. Bruce's discoveries and his reflections on nomadism are revealed largely through conversations with Arkady, who is involved in mapping the sacred sites of the Aborigines. Arkady explains their earthbound philosophy: "'To wound the earth is to wound yourself.... The land should be left untouched: as it was in the Dreamtime when the Ancestors sang the world into existence'" (p. 13).

Later, Bruce and Arkady agree that this philosophy of life, far from being impossibly idealistic, is the hope for the future. The idea of returning to an "original simplicity" was not naive or unscientific or out of touch with reality. "Renunciation," I said, "even at this late date, can work." "I'd agree with that," said Arkady. "The world, if it has a future, has an ascetic future" (p. 148).

As a migratory people, Aborigines are associated with a Golden Age when men were unaggressive and lived in harmony with nature. They illustrate the 'natural' way to live, and with cautious optimism Bruce suggests that 'nature' will eventually reassert itself: 'we may have a far more rigid moral, instinctive backbone than we hitherto suspected' (p. 274).

Aboriginals, then, are positioned as spiritual. The second category represented by Bruce himself indicates that Britons are decent, kindly and cultured. Arkady shares these characteristics, which are dissociated from Australians in the opening paragraphs. Although born in Australia, Arkady is a 'Russian', and 'nothing in his temperament predisposed him to live in the hugger-mugger of Anglo-Saxon suburbia or take a conventional job' (p. 1). 'Anglo-Saxon suburbia' appears to be a false way of life, transported along with racism and philistinism to Australia, while the representatives of mainstream European culture never settle anywhere in the restless acquisition of knowledge. The contrast between the two groups is pointed in an incident in which Arkady attempts to explain the Aboriginals' earthbound philosophy to an Australian policeman. 'The Aboriginals put all their mental energies into keeping the world the way it was. In what way was that inferior? The policeman's mouth shot downwards. "You're not Australian," he said to Arkady' (p. 137). The Australian is positioned as hopelessly prejudiced: from his point of view, interest in spirituality is just the sort of idiocy to be expected of 'a Pom and a Com'. Arkady's Russianness makes the culture which he and Bruce represent broadly European rather than Anglocentric, but he might never have existed. Salman Rushdie, who accompanied Chatwin around Australia gathering material for *The Songlines*, thinks that Arkady is not drawn from any real person, but represents another part of Chatwin himself.⁷

While Bruce and Arkady investigate spirituality and treat individual Aboriginals kindly, Australians behave like the evil beings perceived by *The Daily Mail* reviewer, as if hoping for a self-administered final solution to the Aboriginal problem. The worst racism is encountered at Burnt Flat Hotel, where the bullet hole resulting from the time a barman shot an Aboriginal is framed and marked with a brass plaque. Arkady explains how after the barman's trial and acquittal the neighbours wished to show their support by contributing to his legal fees. 'They organised a gala, with a topless show from Adelaide' (p. 104).

Not all Australians are associated with such behaviour. Enid Lacey, the bookshop owner in Alice Springs, is favourably perceived, and so is Marian, a nurse. But on the whole Australian men are categorized as bigoted, in marked contrast both to Bruce and Arkady, and to the Aboriginals whose spirituality the Europeans seek to understand.

These categories may, as I have suggested, absolve Britons from all blame for the material brutalities of Empire and provide an acceptable national self-image in a post-Imperial age. Such a perspective, however, means gross distortions of history, and it also makes difficult the task of building a multi-racial society, either in Australia or in Britain.

To consider first the question of Aboriginal spirituality. However instructive or consoling it is for Europeans to find out about this, concentration on their spirituality serves to marginalize Aboriginals as material beings. Although no-one in *The Songlines* is so callous as to make the

point, the underlying ideology is that their continuing existence in any material form will not be necessary once their sacred knowledge is incorporated into the body of Western culture. Ted Strehlow, author of *Songs of Central Australia* (1971), had apparently been asked by his black friends to record 'the songs and ceremonies of the passing order ... so their songs should not die with them entirely' (p. 77), and *The Songlines* ends with a description of three old Aboriginal men dying, 'smiling at death in the shade of a ghost-gum' (p. 327). Their apparently happy death juxtaposed with the ritual happy ending of a marriage (of Arkady and Marian) makes it seem as if all is well. In this way, problems like alcoholism, disease, and a death-rate in custody to rival South Africa's are made to seem insignificant. Such improprieties slip from the agenda in a focus on spirituality. Another part of the happy ending is that Bruce has collected his information, which will eventually be published. 'Spirituality' ceases then to be integral to Aboriginal life and becomes something else, a marketable item, like the paintings of Dreamings which fetch such high prices in city art galleries. (p. 291)

Eastern religion has been used in this way for a long time: Gita Mehta investigates the process in *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East*.⁸ Another Indian writer, Mulk Raj Anand, has a character in a novel explain that attributing spirituality to the colonised is a trick to disguise appropriation of their territory, and to deny them a place in the new order:

The Victorians misinterpreted us. It was as if, in order to give a philosophical background to their exploitation of India, they ingeniously concocted a nice little fairy story. 'You don't believe in this world; to you all this is *maya*. Let us look after your country for you and you can dedicate yourself to achieving *Nirvana* (release from the trammels of existence).' But that is all over now ... we will accept and work the machine. But we will do so consciously. We can see through the idiocy of these Europeans who deified money. They were barbarians and lost their heads in the worship of gold. We can steer clear of the pitfalls, because we have the advantages of a race-consciousness six thousand years old, a race-consciousness which accepted all the visible and invisible values. We know life. We know its secret flow. We have danced to its rhythms.⁹

Much of this might apply also to Aboriginals. Having discovered the secret flow of life and danced to its rhythms, as *The Songlines* suggests they have done, they too might be well positioned to 'accept and work the machine'. But they are denied the chance to do this by a dominant culture which insists on their spiritual aloofness from the 'machine' of contemporary life.

The second category conceals Western culture's control of the machine by aligning it with decency and the pursuit of knowledge, as if that is all that the British Empire was ever concerned with. Such a perception veils outrageous violence: it fails to acknowledge the brute force which provided the framework within which knowledge was pursued by Britons in

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In *The Songlines*, Kidder, a white activist who tries to halt the continuing appropriation of Aboriginal sacred knowledge, annoys Bruce intensely and he tells him: "'Knowledge is knowledge ... It's not that easy to dispose of'" (p. 47). He gasps with disbelief at Kidder's suggestion that all unpublished material about Aborigines should be returned to the rightful owners. When Kidder tells him that he was acting illegally in looking at a tjuringa in the British museum, he says he has never heard anything so silly. (p. 48)

Ultimately, the question of whether knowledge is private or not is a matter of power.¹⁰ If Aborigines hold sacred the right to keep some knowledge private, and artists in pursuit of universal 'realities' hold sacred the right of access to all knowledge, what counts is not whose claim is the more sacred, but who has the more power. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when Aboriginal artifacts were acquired for the British Museum (and pickled heads for the British market) there was no question. Captain Cook once fired on the Maori crew of a canoe merely for refusing to stop and answer questions about their habits and customs; four of them were killed. As Belloc put it: 'we have got / The maxim gun and they have not.' W.L. Webb makes the same point: 'The thing about reality is that it's largely a construct of power. In the past we used to send gunboats to readjust the view in parts of the world where other notions of reality had started to obtrude on ours. But in the precarious democracy of today's melting pot that's not such a straightforward operation.'¹¹

Unable to shoot Kidder for impeding the pursuit of knowledge, within the text Bruce eliminates activists in another way, by representing their activities as dangerous folly. They are condemned variously as jargon-mongers, the Canberra mob, and fuckers who don't understand. One activist, a young man called Graham, becomes very closely involved with an Aboriginal tribe. He eventually agrees to undergo their tribal initiation ritual, but the wound to his genitals turns septic and he panics. His fate, explained in some detail, provides a footnote of almost archetypal force to Matthew Arnold's injunction that the denizens of art 'Keep out of the region of immediate practice in the political, social, humanitarian sphere'.¹² Chatwin's story threatens castration to those who disobey.

A dominant culture detached from everyday life is vindicated, and British decency maintained. Britain is even absolved from responsibility for the tragic effects of nuclear testing at Maralinga in 1957. Arkady has briefly informed Bruce that before the British H-Bomb test at Maralinga, the Army posted 'Keep Out!' signs, in English, for Aborigines to read. Not everyone saw them or could read English (p. 87).

He goes on to say that no-one knows how many died because it was all hushed up, and he suggests that further information might be obtained from the Australian they are about to meet, Jim Hanlon. Jim's explanation, however, is made inarticulate with anti-British bitterness, and as he has already insulted Bruce as 'upper-snotty-class' his ravings about 'Anthony

stuck-up-Eden's Cloud' lose credibility (p. 93). Arkady shuts him up, and he later apologises to Bruce: 'Sorry I flew at you - Always fly at Poms' (p. 94). He is forgiven, British decency again preserved, and an account of Maralinga which portrays Britain in an unfavourable light silenced. John Pilger in *A Secret Country* breaks that silence with an explanation of how Britain's commitment to joining the nuclear club meant the contamination of thirteen Aboriginal settlements within 200 miles of the Maralinga Range.¹³ Anthony Sampson says it was a matter of national pride. 'MacMillan was well aware that for satisfying British pride his most useful asset was the H-bomb.'¹⁴

The Songlines ignores this aspect of post-war national identity, promoting instead a more palatable emphasis on culture and decency, just as, in Ann Dummet's scenario, the origins of the slave trade are overlooked in a history which focuses on how England abolished it. To dissociate British culture from power relations and racism requires some extraordinary intellectual and moral gymnastics. It means, for example, applauding Dickens for attacking Podsnappery, but never knowing that when in 1864 Governor Eyre was indicted for the savage suppression of a revolt in Jamaica, Dickens joined the Eyre Defence Committee along with Carlyle, Ruskin, Trollope, Tennyson and Charles Kingsley. Such a line-up of major writers may be seen as culture's blessing on an act of savagery comparable (except that far more people were involved) with the way Burnt Creek whites rallied in support of the barman who shot an Aboriginal. In 1919, General Dyer, who gave the order leading to the deaths of 379 unarmed Indians at Amritsar, was also stoutly defended by his English friends. Readers of the *Morning Post* subscribed a £25,000 testimonial.¹⁵ The Ruskin who championed aestheticism is easily assimilable into our cultural tradition as we like to know it: the same Ruskin who told Oxford students in 1870 that 'We are still unregenerate in race: a race mingled of the best Northern blood'¹⁶ is easily forgotten. The more patronising variety of racism observed amongst Australians by Bruce also finds its counterpart in 'cultured' attitudes. The Australian policeman described earlier who says about Aborigines: 'I never said I didn't like them. But they're like children. They've got a childish mentality' (p. 137) has the same attitude as Philip Mason, an English patrician who writes about India (1985), describing how a District Officer felt about the Indians in his district. They were 'people childish no doubt, cunning but simple, laughable, stubborn'.¹⁷ Attaching the stigma of racism to Australians serves to disguise its prevalence in Britain. Furthermore, Australia is seen as having succumbed to the economic domination of other nations out of sheer greed, as if this could never happen to a more cultured people. Bruce asks Arkady: "'Why, in this land of untold resources, do Australians go on selling them off to foreigners?" "They'd sell off anything", he shrugged' (p. 142). Categorising Aborigines as spiritual, Britons as cultured and Australians as philistines disguises the brutality of Imperialism and blurs

the realities of its aftermath. In doing so it makes more difficult the task of building multi-cultural societies. Within the rhetoric of *The Songlines*, the world should have been kept the way it was and political activism is discredited.

A different viewpoint is expressed by the Aboriginal poet Oodgeroo (Kath Walker). To a degree she endorses Bruce's opposition to activism when she says that the Aboriginal Civil Rights organisations in the 1970s broke up because the Labor Government wanted not only to support, but also to control them. But active white support is clearly still welcome. On January 26, 1988, on the same day that Burnam Burnam was staging his protest in England, there occurred the largest gathering of Aboriginal and white protesters in Australia's history, to demonstrate against the Australia Day celebration and its implications. Of this march and of Aborigines' place in Australia Oodgeroo comments:

We'll go on suffering. But we are going to survive. And what we have to do now is find, on the white Australian scene, the true humanitarians. And we found a lot of them on that march. That was brilliant, how the whites stood with us. And there were a lot of them. It's the biggest march in Australian history.¹⁸

In direct opposition to Bruce's scenario of Aborigines dying happily while European whites accumulate sacred knowledge and Australians exhibit bigotry, Oodgeroo acknowledges suffering and, without dwelling on this, welcomes the idea that whites should work with Aborigines for a more positive future.

Would such a demonstration occur in Britain on a national day? The disadvantages experienced by Britain's ethnic minorities may not equal the appalling situation of the Australian Aborigines. Nevertheless, the type of solidarity Oodgeroo applauds might well ameliorate the problems in housing, education and employment experienced by blacks in Britain. It is by no means clear-cut, however, that the cultural tradition includes any sense that there are wrongs that should be righted. The most newsworthy event of St. George's Day, 1991 was the publication of a speech from Prince Charles re-affirming the value of the English literary tradition. But an authoritative part of that tradition pretends that the Empire, as an exercise in the acquisition of territory and wealth, never happened. Where Australia is concerned, this pretence is easier to sustain from the old Imperial centre. Aboriginal spirituality can be assimilated into the cultural tradition, but Aborigines themselves cannot: rejection of them, however, can be deemed an Australian shortcoming. When blacks come to Britain and there are no bigoted Australians to castigate, the problem is restated. Indian spirituality is a welcome embellishment to the cultural tradition, but Indians themselves rest less easily and in the rhetoric of *The Salisbury Review*, for example, they threaten to swamp it. John Casey, a Cambridge English don, has recommended the voluntary repatriation of Commonwealth immigrants on the grounds that they will not assimilate and will

weaken British culture. This represents the extreme, but at a more moderate level a tradition which cloaks the savagery of Empire in an affirmation of culture continues to reproduce itself in works such as Chatwin's. A Eurocentric conviction that Europe understands Australia better than it understands itself is evident in other writing. Thus Terry Coleman in *The Guardian* finds that it is Australians who have adopted the Aboriginal Dreamtime as 'a bit of Palaeo-liberal chic'.¹⁹ Like Bruce, Coleman points a contrast between Australians who are too philistine to appreciate the mysteries in their midst, and a European who has got it right. The French historian, Robert Lacour-Gayet, 'probably the most disinterested of those who have written recent histories of Australia', is the authority on whom he bases his explanation of the Dreamtime. Salman Rushdie reinforces a stereotypical view of Australia in an anecdote he tells about a lunch-time signing session Chatwin was asked to do in a book-shop in Alice Springs. 'Bruce went to the bookshop with his Mont Blanc pen at the appointed hour. Not a single person came into the shop.'²⁰ The point of the story, presumably, is that Chatwin was doing his best to promote culture but that Australians were too philistine to appreciate him. In another context, Rushdie has discouraged such stereotyping, and argued the need for 'new and better maps of reality ... new languages with which we can understand the world'.²¹ It may be that there is a hint of irony in the mention of the Mont Blanc pen, as if the culture its owner represents is a little too precious. It is likely, however, that the story would be taken at face value as an illustration of the contrast between English culture and Australian philistinism.

It is difficult in Britain to redress the balance of Anglocentric perceptions by referring to Australians' views because they tend not to be published here. Chatwin's books were on sale in Alice Springs, but Australians' carefully researched studies of Aboriginal culture are not easily obtained in Britain – and even if they were, is it likely that Henry Reynolds, say, would draw large crowds to a bookshop in somewhere like Barnstaple?

Chatwin may have helped to put Aborigines on the map. But it is an old map, exquisite and tasteful like a Mont Blanc pen, and as unrelated to everyday life. As the bicentenary recedes and Australia fades from the forefront of European consciousness, Chatwin's Australia may be a dominant surviving image. There are better maps of reality. From January 26, 1988, comes Burnam Burnam's reminder of the rapacity of Empire, and Oodgeroo's pleasure that whites, acknowledging that such an Empire did happen, have committed themselves to working with blacks for future betterment. If assimilated into British consciousness, Burnam Burnam and Oodgeroo between them offer a more positive blue-print for the future than Chatwin's dream of a return to a nomadic Golden Age. Some adjustment to the cultural tradition might be required, but blacks' material well-being would thrive the better for it – as would exquisiteness and taste.

NOTES

1. See Philip Morrissey, 'Restoring A Future to a Past' *Aboriginal Culture Today*, ed. Anna Rutherford, special issue of *Kunapiipi*, Vol 10 Nos 1 and 2 (1988), pp. 10-15.
2. Ann Dummert, *Portrait of English Racism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 50.
3. Joseph Conrad, 'Heart of Darkness' in *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1974), p. 59.
4. *ibid.*, p. 50.
5. Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (London: Picador, 1988), p. 13. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
6. Review of *The Songlines* quoted on the back of the Picador edition (1988).
7. Salman Rushdie, 'Arkady's Dreams in Alice Springs', *The Observer*, 19 November 1989, p. 45.
8. Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola, Marketing the Mystic East* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980).
9. Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 153.
10. In April 1989 the British press and police were seriously concerned about private letters stolen from Princess Anne and offered to a paper for publication. The private papers were returned, and the theft investigated.
11. W.L. Webb, 'The Imam and the Scribe', *The Guardian*, February 17 1989.
12. Matthew Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1865) in Peter Keating ed. *The Victorian Prophets* (London: Fontana, 1981), p. 203.
13. John Pilger, *A Secret Country* (London: Vintage, 1990), pp. 168-9.
14. Anthony Sampson, *MacMillan: A Study in Ambiguity* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1968), p. 132.
15. James Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1979), pp. 273-277.
16. Ruskin quoted in K.K. Aziz, *The British in India: A Study in Imperialism* (Islamabad, 1976) p. 34.
17. Philip Mason, *The Men Who Ruled India* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985) p. 66.
18. Oodgeroo quoted in 'Recording the Cries of the People: An Interview With Oodgeroo', *Aboriginal Culture Today*, p. 21.
19. Terry Coleman, 'Australia's Fairy Tales', *The Guardian*, February 22 1988, p. 19.
20. Salman Rushdie, 'Arkady's Dreams in Alice Springs'.
21. Salman Rushdie, 'Outside the Whale', *Granta* 11 (Spring 1984).